

## REMBRANDT'S "EYE OPERATION"

During the recent worldwide tercentenary commemoration of the death of Rembrandt (1606-1669) the Swedish National Museum at Stockholm displayed 37 of Rembrandt's etchings and 34 of his drawings. Of this sumptuous display no adequate account will be given or can be given in the present brief note. What significant comment could a medical editor excogitate about *The Three Trees*, or the portrait of Jan Lutma, or the *Hundred-Guilder Print*?

Among the drawings displayed there is one that is likely to be of special interest to our readers. It is titled *The Eye Operation*<sup>1</sup> and was made with pen and bistre. It depicts a middle-aged man seated in a chair in a relaxed attitude. The man is depicted in full profile, gazing toward the reader's right; hence only the *right* half of the face is visible. A female figure leans toward him and appears to be applying a cloth to his *left* eye. Behind the patient and slightly to his left stands a man who is leaning forward toward him. This person rests his right hand on the back of the patient's head and holds in his mouth a straight slender object which might be about seven or eight inches long in a full-scale depiction. The long object appears to be very thin for two thirds of its length and to end in a somewhat thicker handle. Three additional figures complete the scene.

Apparently the drawing depicts an ophthalmic operation and the surgeon is holding the knife in his mouth.

The arrangement of the scene, with the surgical field turned away from the viewer, deprives us of any clue as to the nature and purpose of the operation. If the procedure was undertaken for the treatment of cataract, the operation was probably a couching, since the extraction technique of Daviel (1752) lay more than a century in the future.

What can be said of the practice of holding the knife in the mouth? About 1932 I heard that such was the habit of a few old-timers but I never learned their names. A recent canvass of ophthalmologists has yielded almost completely negative results. One ophthalmologist of 40 years' experience recalled having heard in 1931 of an old gentleman

1. Lindwall, Bo: *Rembrandt, Teckning och Grafik*. Stockholm, Nationalmusei Utställningskatalog Nr. 326, 1969, item 69. This catalogue will be deposited in the Library of The New York Academy of Medicine. The drawing under discussion is reproduced also in Slive, S.: *Drawings of Rembrandt*, New York, Dover, 1965, vol. 1, No. 133.



*The Eye Operation* by Rembrandt. Reproduced by courteous permission of the National Museum, Stockholm. Slightly reduced from the original size.

(born 1854; M.D. 1877) who was reputed to rest the cataract knife in his mouth. A search of old medical and surgical writings was undertaken by several friends and by me; this ranged from the writings of Bartisch and Tulpus to modern times but disclosed no reference to the use of the mouth as an instrument stand. Perhaps some reader of the *Bulletin* may have relevant reminiscences to contribute.

Although Rembrandt painted many aged persons and beggars, portrayals of disease are not common in his work. The depiction of Tobias healing his father's blindness<sup>2</sup> and an etching *Sheet of Studies, with a Woman Lying Ill in Bed* (1639)<sup>3</sup> are rarities from the viewpoint of Rembrandt's subject matter.

It is necessary to add that specialists in the history of art are by no means unanimous as to the interpretation of the drawing that forms the subject of the present note. Some scholars believe it portrays the old operation for the relief of mental disease by removal of a stone from the head.<sup>4</sup> Evidently hypotheses range as widely as in the arts as in the sciences.

S. J.

2. Bredius, A.: *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, 3d ed. Revised by H. Gerson. New York, Phaidon, 1969, p. 416.

3. In the British Museum.

4. Benesch, O.: *The Drawings of Rembrandt*. London, Phaidon Press, 1954-1957, vol. 5, p. 323. See also a drawing by Rembrandt's pupil Govaert Flinck in Von Moltke, J. W.: *Govaert Flinck* (1615-1660). Amsterdam, Hertzberger, 1965, pp. 172-73.